

AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE HOLY

Luke 9: 28-36

This is a story about a hope of every Christian. Each of us would love to have this experience, for a remarkable thing occurs.

The scene is somewhere on the grassy slopes of Mount Hermon in northern Galilee, almost into Syria. It is night. The disciples – Peter, James, and John – are very tired. Jesus has withdrawn into the mountains and has taken the three of them with him.

Why does Jesus go there? We did he hike off on this expedition to these high and lonely mountain slopes? Luke gives us a clue. He reports that Jesus is praying. (What would you give for the opportunity to eaves drop on Jesus in prayer?) The disciples spent each day with Jesus. They hear his preaching and teaching. They witness his healing blind, lame, deaf, and diseased folks; yet, what is it they ask him to teach them? *“Lord, teach us to pray?”* They recognize the direct link and intimacy Jesus enjoys with the Father in prayer and the amazing power Jesus displays in his ministry. Jesus went to Mt. Hermon to pray in solitude away from the crowds with his three closest allies.

Put yourself in Jesus’ place. He is on his way to Jerusalem to a cross. He recognizes what he faces. A week earlier he’d told his disciples that he must suffer many things and be killed. However, there are lingering questions that need answers before he sets out on this last journey. Is he doing exactly what God wants him to do?

Barclay offers: “Jesus went up to Mt. Hermon to ask God, ‘Am I doing your will in setting my face to go to Jerusalem?’ Jesus went up to Mt. Hermon to listen for the voice of God.”

And, “as he was praying...” he was “transfigured.” The appearance of his face changes. His clothes become as bright as a flash of lightning. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each report that Jesus’ appearance is dazzlingly radiant and glistening. What is going on here? What are we to make of this? Was this an actual historical occurrence or was this an intense vision of the disciples? Or is this a myth that grew with its telling?

Some commentators say it is a vision, experienced by Peter, James, and John. This is their shared mystical experience. **Yet, others insist:** “Those who refuse to accept the reality of (Jesus’ transfiguration) do so because they are unwilling to accept it, rather than because they have any conclusive evidence for their theories...We are not here concerned with a vision produced by natural causes, but with one sent directly by God...Our narrative presents no stumbling block for those who believe in divine revelation. The narrative in every respect bears the stamp of authenticity.”

The transfiguration is one of the few events recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke each. They chose to report it because it is a pivotal event in the life of our Lord. It has great significance for our lives.

That said, what is going on here? The Greek word translated “transfiguration” is the root for our English word “metamorphosis.” An example of metamorphosis is the

caterpillar that spins a cocoon and later emerges as a butterfly. The gospel writers are saying that Jesus' human nature was radically altered. They describe his nature as dazzling whiteness or light. Matthew says his face shined like the sun. There is nothing quite as bright as a winter day with clear skies, shining sun, and snow-covered ground. Jesus appearance was like that. What is happening here is that Jesus' deity is shining forth.

For the most part, Jesus' deity was totally cloaked by his humanity. It wasn't obvious. That's why when Peter recognized the divinity of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi and said, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,*" Jesus replied, "*Blessed are you, Peter. For this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.*" Recognition of Jesus' divinity came by God's revelation, not through human intuition. It was not obvious to people.

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him to Mt. Hermon. As he prays they have the enormous privilege of catching a glimpse of his deity breaking through. They receive a foretaste of the ultimate hope of every Christian – a beatific vision as theologians call it. These three disciples get to see the glory of God face-to-face in Jesus. They have an encounter with the holy.

While Jesus is transfigured, Moses and Elijah appear with him. They talk about his coming death. Why Moses and Elijah? Because they represent redemption history. It is the contention of Christian faith that the Law and Prophets, represented by Moses as the Law and Elijah as the Prophets, are fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus. They come to Jesus as he prays to affirm him as God's Son and confirm his destiny on the cross. Their appearance to

Jesus is God's signal to proceed. They speak about his departure to Jerusalem, and Jesus is assured he is following the Father's plan.

Peter reacts to all of this as we probably would. He wants to pitch camp and bask in divine glory. He says, *“Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”* What he really means is: “This is great! I hope this never stops. I just want to stay here and enjoy this.”

Joanie's mother had a friend named Margaret who had a stroke. At the hospital she was pronounced dead only to be later revived. She told Joanie and me that, when she died, she was enveloped in a fantastic, brilliant light; and she experienced a peace she'd never known possible. The funny thing was that when she found herself coming back to her body and this life, she didn't want to come back. The experience she was having was too enjoyable to want to return. Whatever else you make of such “near-death experiences,” and there are several possibilities, Margaret, and others, who have experienced such, sound very much like Peter in his reaction to his encounter with the holy.

The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is: “Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.” That's what Peter wants to do. He wants to enjoy this holy encounter forever.

The last book of the Bible, Revelation, tells of God's new heaven and new earth. It says in heaven there is no sun, moon, stars, or lights. They won't be needed because the radiance of God will illumine everything. In God's new

heaven and earth, we will live every day in the light of God, enjoying God forever.

After his transfiguration, God sends Jesus down from the mountain reassured as to who he is and what he is to do. After their encounter with the holy, God sends the three disciples down from the mountain with a command. Before they left, God spoke to them and said, *“This is my Son, listen to him!”* God is calling for obedience to Jesus. They are to transfigure their hearing into obedient discipleship.

How many voices are there calling for our allegiance? Offering us advice? Telling us what we should be doing? God says we should listen to his Son. Encounters with the holy, however they come to us, call us to allegiance to Jesus Christ and obedience to his teaching.

Raphael painted a magnificent picture of the transfiguration. It is divided into two parts. The upper part shows Jesus and the disciples on the mountain top. The face of Jesus is a revelation of the love, beauty, and goodness of God. It shines brilliantly. The disciples are deeply touched by this holy moment. The lower part is a picture of human need. It reveals a sick boy, his worried father, his mother on her knees in prayer. The impression is that the energy received in an encounter with the holiness of God can and must be used for the healing of human need.

Paul spells it out in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, when he says each of us is to reflect the glory of the Lord which we have seen in Jesus. We are to be changed (transfigured) into Christ-likeness. We are to take on his

glory. We are to become like Jesus – loving, forgiving, helping, healing, and obedient to God. This how we listen to Jesus.

When Peter, James, and John came down from the mountain, they kept this experience to themselves and told no one what they had seen. Luke does not say why this is so. Perhaps Jesus told them not to share it yet, as he did at other times about other things and events. We don't know why, but we do know that after Jesus' resurrection, they were free to tell about it and did so with joy. **Peter wrote** that they were *“eyewitnesses of his majesty...The voice from heaven we heard, when we were with him on the holy mountain.”* **And John wrote:** *“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

God has a word for us this morning. It is the same word he spoke to the disciples during their holy encounter: ***“This Jesus is my beloved Son, listen to him!”***

Sources:

- Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke*.
- R.C. Sproul, “The Transfiguration”
- William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, WJK